Reviews : A Winter's Snake: Dramatic Form in the Tragedies of John Webster

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to be read. Professor Ayres stresses the weight of *Sejanus* as text by reproducing the quarto's sig Mlr, the central part of which, he says, is 'like an inscription carved in stone and inserted into the text' (p 2).

It is also clear that Professor Ayres feels uncertain about *Sejanus* as a performance text: 'the play (at least in uncut form) is probably best represented not on stage but in the theatre of the mind' (p. 27) It is, of course, true that Jonson's efforts to see that the texts of his plays were properly printed did a lot for the dignity of English dramatists. This edition of *Sejanus* is one of which Jonson would have approved, although he would have been culturally shocked to see his sources cited in translation. Professor Ayres draws attention to his practice with Jonson's spelling and punctuation (p 8), explains his views of the political problems the play caused for Jonson (pp 16f.); and writes instructively about Jonson's way with Roman history (pp. 28f) The text reads well (the respect for Jonson's punctuation pays off) and has been printed accurately and carefully, although 'stangely' (p 92) should be 'strangely'.

Even though Professor Ayres feels that *Sejanus* is best produced in 'the theatre of the mind', he does recognize that in 'three outstanding scenes' Jonson shows 'a particularly fine dramatic sense' (p 26) Yet he also reminds us that 'There is no record of any performance of *Sejanus* between its Globe production and that by William Poel in 1928, and none of a professional kind since Poel's'. Famously, the Globe production was hissed from the stage. Such a negative verdict would seem to have been accepted by potential producers ever since

For Professor Ayres, 'even on its own terms *Sejanus* is a radically flawed masterpiece' (p 27) This is because of an 'irresolvable problem' in the play's attitude 'to the obviously real and living goddess Fortune' (p. 28) Much of the weight of this derives from Terentius's closing lines, which are seen as 'the pious contradiction of everything the play has shown us'. But there is little reason to take Terentius's views as definitive It is not difficult to find other plays in which concluding remarks are inadequate closures (*Dr Faustus*, *Macbeth*, and *Hamlet* come easily to mind), while the 'irresolvable problem' need not be seen as a flaw. Jonson articulates, primarily, 'a social tragedy' (p 28), and his play suggests that such divinities as exist sport cruelly with humans There is here a congruence of physical and metaphysical, and that Tiberius is still in place and Macro in the ascendant at the play's end fits both the social and the divine spheres Jonson was hardly alone in finding the relationship between free will and determinism 'irresolvable', but his play does not depend on the solution of this issue

Professor Ayres (p. 39) quotes the actor Robert Speaight, who commented that the Poel production gave 'a rich, satiric picture of the Roman decadence'. To be involved with even an amateur production of *Sejanus* is to become aware of how close the tragedy is to *Volpone* and *The Revenger's Tragedy*. Had Professor Ayres taken Speaight's hint he might have seen that the 'three outstanding scenes' are not exceptions to some norm of untheatricality

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A Winter's Snake: Dramatic Form in the Tragedies of John Webster. By CHRISTINA LUCKYJ Pp. xxvi+182 Athens, Ga and London. University of Georgia Press, 1989. $27.50

This is a book about Webster's two best-known plays which has something fresh and useful to say, and, moreover, it is rational in structure and clear in expression so that it can be read by students—and even intelligent non-students who happen to be interested in Webster—as well as by academic specialists This combination of lucidity and rationality is not to be understood as implying intellectual feebleness,

rather the reverse, for Christina Luckyj shows that critics who have been content to record 'discontinuities' in narrative and characterization in Webster have fallen back on the easy comparison with the modern Theatre of the Absurd rather than pursuing the question more rigorously, in relation to the detailed structure of the plays and, more generally, to recent work on Shakespeare, artificially isolated from his contemporary Webster Lest this be taken in the present climate to mean that mere reactionary spirit informs the study, let it be said rather that Christina Luckyj makes a modest-sounding proposal which is in fact refreshing The question of Webster's dramatic construction has always been inseparable from critical assessment of his moral concerns: 'His dramaturgy is founded on juxtapositions, parallels and repetitions which resist reduction to a single moral belief, yet need not lead to a chaotic vision of human experience' (p xx).

This study seeks to apply to Webster, first, an interpretation identifying repetition as a rhetorical principle informing the episodic design, since repetition 'is for emphasis, intensification, and comparison' (p. xiv), and the establishing of analogies, contrasts, and emphases in the presentation of issues, second, repetition in Webster is viewed in terms of audience response and theatrical performance, and many modern reviews and prompt-books are used to trace the way the plays unfold progressively in stage performance, revealing patterns not apparent to the reader. As the list of reviews on pp. 171–5 shows, recent years have seen enough productions of both plays to constitute a substantial theatre history, and the quality of many of the directors, actors, and reviewers might even be thought to rival the modern academic interpreters of Webster It was an excellent idea of Christina Luckyj's to refer to this lively source of evidence, and she handles it tactfully

The approach works by close attention to details, as they build individual dramatic episodes; then these individual episodes are identified in larger patterns of mirroring and inverting—symmetry through antithesis—and patterns of varying styles representing common motifs. Perhaps one might pick out two topics to exemplify the interest of Christina Luckyj's approach, one in long-focus and one in close-focus, which touch on the question of Webster's presentation of men and women, the 'persons' of his plays. In *The White Devil* modern stage productions confirm that the trial of Vittoria 'transcends the linear narrative to become an emblem for the whole' (p 114), and as Professor Luckyj says, its visual simplicity and order come 'as a relief' after the restless fluidity and shifting points of view of earlier scenes Yet the scene makes an impact in favour of the defendants which contradicts earlier episodes implicating them in guilt. Evidence from reviews is cited to show how some productions have sought to efface this contradictory feature by playing Vittoria as a hypocrite—indeed, one Vittoria shed a white cloak to reveal a scarlet dress beneath Yet in 1983 at Bristol Vittoria was presented as shiftingly contradictory, keeping a 'sympathetic dignity' in her court-room performance Then an alert spectator can notice that throughout the scene various details reactivate the audience's memory of the passionate affair between Brachiano and Vittoria—one detail being Brachiano's spreading of a gown, recalling Zanche's spreading of a carpet when Brachiano first met Vittoria in 1. ii Does not the deliberate devising of such details indicate that Webster requires an audience to register both the lust of the defendants and their heroic defiance which they witness? Christina Luckyj argues that the complex experience has parallels in Shakespeare, and that a similar strenuousness of critical activity is in order when thinking about Webster.

A feature of the book in general is that detailed analysis really is pursued to exhaustive lengths to test out the hypothesis that Webster is a deliberate artist, and that his process does not involve incoherence A good example is the account of Act III of *The White Devil* as a single dramatic unit Following the technique of Emrys

Jones in his *Scenic Form in Shakespeare*, Christina Luckyj shows how it is framed by episodes involving Flamineo to emphasize its concentric design, but the highly worked structure coincides with a strange asymmetry, since Webster delays news of Isabella's death until after the trial, and the boy Giovanni's lament, so that the normal sequence of cause and effect is reversed; this subdues response to the narrative in terms of individual will and responsibility, and awakens awareness of a larger sense of destruction The suspension of causal narrative allows the analogous framework of the whole design to have its effect; an audience compares various perspectives—those of Brachiano, of Vittoria, of Isabella—at the level of individual agents, and also compares their perspective with the wider perspective opened up on the whole image of destruction, signalled by the deceptively small voice of Giovanni: 'What do the dead do, uncle?'

Some critics at the present time would discount all but the 'demystifying' element in Webster, an over-hasty skimming of J. W. Lever's study of 1972, *The Tragedy of State*, might lead some to suppose that the history of the Italian states that Webster drew upon is the key to his dramatic concerns When one considers the actual texture of the dramatic and theatrical language, however, such a position is difficult to sustain Precisely through the system of interplay, of analogy, of repetition, dynamic mental activity is provoked in a spectator, the experience of events from the perspective of individual persons in the plays is persistently contrasted to wider perspectives and patterns which draw an audience to difficult confrontations I myself saw the production of *The Duchess of Malfi* at Manchester in 1980 which this book mentions, and I can testify to the play's affective power The vast emptiness of the lofty stone Victorian Exchange building dwarfed the small polygon in which the audience were confined Usually that vast space above is forgotten during a performance, but despite the truth and vigour of Helen Mirren and Bob Hoskins in acting the Duchess and Bosola, it was the echoing and chill darkness of that space above which became the dominant experience

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The Elements of Life: Biography and Portrait-Painting in Stuart and Georgian England. By RICHARD WENDORF. Pp. xxiv+308 Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990 £35

The author of this illuminating book is Librarian of the Houghton Library at Harvard University, but before that he was Professor of English Literature and Art History at Northwestern University in Chicago It is difficult to know whether the title of the professorial chair in Chicago was devised as a result of economic cuts or as an indication of the expansion of interdisciplinary studies. In this case it was probably the latter and the line of research crossing the boundaries of two disciplines that Wendorf has chosen to pursue has proved to be of absorbing interest. The purpose is to compare the art of portrait-painting with the writing of biography extending in art-historical terms from Van Dyck to Sir Joshua Reynolds, or in literary terms from Izaak Walton and John Evelyn to James Boswell Quite apart from the volume of detailed research that such a study necessitates, Wendorf proves to be a sensitive commentator on both portraiture and biography. He is particularly eloquent on the work of Van Dyck (for example, *Venetia Stanley, Lady Digby, as Prudence* and *William Feilding, Earl of Denbigh*) and Reynolds (for example, the portraits of David Garrick and Samuel Johnson), just as he relishes the texts of both John Aubrey or James Boswell. A new interpretation of Van Dyck's *Self-Portrait with a Sunflower* is offered. One of the virtues of the book is the author's control over his material so that the essential argument regarding the representation and characterization of